

Focus. Gratitude. Letting Go.

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany + February 7, 2021

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

Father Patrick Raymond

Jesus left the synagogue at Capernaum, and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons. – Mark 1:29-39

After more than a month of Sundays, we are still (believe it or not) in the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark. And now we are far enough along to look back and see that the author has been walking us through a gallery of images. All of them show us Jesus, the Messiah, and, at the same time, each portrait is unique.

The first image we saw in this gallery was our first view of Jesus in this gospel: his baptism by John and the voice from heaven 'You are my Son, the Beloved.' (1:11) The second portrait in this gallery remains covered with a sheet. We will return here and uncover it on the first Sunday of Lent, studying Christ's temptations by Satan in the wilderness. In the next scene, Jesus embarks on his mission and enlists four fishermen to share in that mission. (1:16-20)

All of these images are outdoor scenes. But last Sunday we moved inside, to the synagogue in Capernaum. Jesus taught with an authority that rang true, opened hearts and changed lives. (1:22) Also there, Jesus freed a man from a demon, showing for the first time his power to heal. (1:23-26,30-31)

The healing power also comes to the fore in the first part of today's gospel. This story also takes place in Capernaum, on that same sabbath in fact. The healing begins with the mother-in-law of Simon and then exponentially expands: "they brought to [Jesus] all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons." As I imagine it, the scene had the feel of one of our overwhelmed hospitals during the pandemic, only Jesus seems to have been handling intake, diagnosis, surgery, nursing and discharge, all at once.

Suddenly, though, the focus and tone of the text dramatically change. A new picture comes into view: "In the morning, while it was still very dark, [Jesus] got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed." Clearly the gospel author wants us to see Jesus as a person of prayer. But notice that we are not told *what* he prayed or *how* he prayed or *how long*. Notice that we're told more about what happens before and after his prayer. These before and after features may also be showing us who Jesus was and, perhaps as well, how we ourselves are to follow him.

Of note as the story takes this turn are two verbs that tell us, in our translation, both that Jesus "got up" and that he "went out ..." to pray. Why two verbs when one may have sufficed? Let's begin with the second verb, in the Greek: ἀπελθεν (ἀπηλθεν) could be understood as going to, or here the movement of Jesus to the place of prayer. But his going to pray could be

seen as dependent on the first verb *exElthen* (ἐξῆλθεν) – a different form of the same verb. It has the sense of ‘going away from,’ leaving behind. What is implied by this first verb may have been all that Jesus left behind – came away from – in the temporal realm in order to be renewed in spirit in the heavenly realm.

Disentangling these two Greek verbs may seem like nothing more than an academic indulgence. But doing so may prepare us to see some added layers of meaning as the story unfolds, starting with the moment as Jesus is praying and, “*Simon and his companions hunted for him.*” The Greek here has no nuances: They *hunted* for him. And “*When they found him, they said to him, ‘Everyone is searching for you.’*” Can you hear the urgency? And the implicit messages: “*They need you!*” “*We don’t know what to do!*” “*No one else can do what you do!*” “*Hurry!*”

I’m sure I would have anxiously rushed back to the town. But not Jesus. Instead, he says, *Let’s move on.* Specifically, “*Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.*”

The dynamics here remind me of a daily practice suggested by an author named Neil Pasricha [pronounced *pass-REACH-ahh*]. He proposes starting each day by taking two minutes to complete three sentences.¹ Jesus was arguably demonstrating similar intentions here.

The first sentence that Pasricha says we should finish is: “*I will focus on ...*” Focus is what Jesus demonstrates as he ‘got up and went out’ to pray. Focus is even more emphatically shown in his response to those who came hunting for him. *We’re not going back; we’re moving on, to continue the mission,* because, he concludes, “*that is what I came to do.*”

Pasricha’s second sentence begins, “*I am grateful for ...*” We can imagine that Jesus got up and went out to pray in part to renew his gratitude. Jesus knew that the only reliable, enduring source of all goodness and true peace was to be found in the presence of his heavenly Father.

The third and final sentence that Pasricha proposes we should finish daily begins: “*I will let go of ...*” Tempting as it must have been to go back to Capernaum, to heal even more people, Jesus let go of it. Knowing that his decision would elicit disappointment and even judgment, Jesus let go of it.

What you or I may need to let go of may be unique to each of us and from day to day: *I will let go of* things that are arguably important and meaningful but that will undermine what I feel called to focus on. *I will let go of* past sins and failures, after I’ve confessed them and made a reasonable attempt to right them. *I will let go of* the deadweight of habits and ideas that give me a false sense of identity but that no longer ring true or serve a living, growing faith in me.

Each of the portraits we’ve taken in from the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark are meant to introduce us to Jesus, and to different aspects of his divine and human nature, and to his mission. From these images we begin to understand why he came and why it matters.

As I imagine them, some or all of the images in this gallery have small mirrors alongside of them. In faith, we take a look into these mirrors as we seek connection and meaning and purpose in our own lives. Imagine with me, if you will, one of those mirrors alongside of the image of the prayer scene at the end of today’s text. And imagine looking for a deeper faith as you notice three unfinished sentences etched into the frame of the mirror “*I will focus on ...*” “*I am grateful for ...*” “*I will let go of ...*” **Amen.**

¹ From ‘Writing Just 3 Sentences Each Day Can Massively Boost Your Productivity and Happiness,’ in a January 2020 feature for Inc. NB: Pasricha proposes the exercise should take two minutes or less. I have tried this exercise and have been unable to complete it in that time ...